

# PUNCTUATION MARKS IN PLAY TITLES

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In a recent article in the New York Times, Mickey Spillane -- the creator of that hard-hitting 1950s detective Mike Hammer -- discussed a forthcoming musical based upon his work, Oh, Mike! In the course of the discussion, the best-selling author observed "Any title with punctuation is fantastic." Now, Mr. Spillane is a shrewd man and I think he has a point. Indeed there is a recent trend (probably not fair to call it a fad) to add exclamation marks to titles in order to elicit a sense of excitement. Oh! Calcutta!, for example, has two exclamation marks (count 'em, two) and a number of musicals, such as Fiorello! (1959), Oklahoma! (1943), and Red, Hot, and Blue! (1936), have featured one. Even straight plays have used the exclamation mark -- Ah, Wilderness! by Eugene O'Neill is probably the most famous example, but we probably shouldn't forget the 1943 production of You Touched Me! by Tennessee Williams and Donald Windham. How much a single or even double punctuation mark contributes to the success or failure of a play is certainly open to debate, but try to imagine how those above-named titles would look without exclamation points. Dull? Indeed!

Now this not-quite-idle speculation leads me to a trivia question -- just when did playwrights begin punctuating the titles of plays? Who was the first great showman to warm the cockles of his English teacher's heart (assuming that the hearts of English teachers do have cockles) by dragging punctuation marks out of the closet and thrusting them up amid the colored lights of Broadway?

We know, for instance, that Shakespeare didn't punctuate his titles. Imagine Hamlet!, King Lear!, or Twelfth! Night! There are, of course, numerous play titles that feature question marks -- plays such as the 1885 Are You Insured?, or the 1901 production of Are You a Mason? But who was the first to use the exclamation mark?

Would you believe George Gershwin? On November 9, 1926, the Gershwin musical Oh, Kay! opened in New York City. Some theater-goers might want to remember the songs; I prefer to remember the grammar. My answer, of course, is only tentative. I await to be corrected. I know that there is an expert out there who will dash forward with the light of truth. In the meantime we should not lose heart. Punctuation marks are not dead yet. Not by a long shot!